

A mother and child relax on the Great Salt Lake Beach as a wind sock sails over their heads. Kite fliers love the huge beach.

Barry Kough/The Salt Lake Tribune



Jeff Allred/The Salt Lake Tribune

Whether a visitor wants to take a sailboard ride on the salty waters or snap a photograph at sunset, the Great Salt Lake offers a surprising array of recreational opportunities. Though facilities are poor, close to a half million tourists visit the lake each year.

Saltair Mystique Still Haunts Utah's Salt Lake

By Tom Wharton
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Since the pioneers arrived in 1847, many resorts on the Great Salt Lake have opened with fanfare and closed with a thud. But few have captured the public's imagination like Saltair.

Built by the Mormon Church in 1893 on 2,500 10-inch wooden pillars, the mosque-like pavilion housed what locals believed to be the largest ballroom in the world. Thousands flocked to dance, ride the world-famous Giant Racer roller coaster and swim in the lake.

"Saltair was the place to be on a hot date," said Rosie Brimhall of the Salt Lake County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "The pavilion went out over the water. When my folks mention the old Saltair, you can feel the excitement the old building generated."

But the fickle lake level, high winds and fire plagued the old Saltair throughout its colorful history.

A 1931 fire burned down Giant Racer, a legendary roller coaster known for stranding riders on curves and at the bottom of hills. After being rebuilt, a 75-mile per hour wind storm leveled it for good in 1957.

Dry years left the pavilion high and dry. And — despite repeated attempts to keep it alive — the weathered and ancient amusement park closed for good in 1968. As another attempt to bring back Saltair was mounted, the building burned to the ground in November of 1970.

Wally Wright constructed a new Saltair Resort south of the original in 1981. Using a similar motif, the facility includes a water

slide, small roller coaster, bumper boats, a pavilion with souvenir shops, a hardwood dance floor and several shops.

He had fond memories of the old resort.

"I used to go out there on dates when I was in high school," he recalled. "It was quite an experience. But access to the water was a real problem. They tried different ways to get people to the lake. They used a tram. They tried to pump water back into a pond area around the pavilion. But neither one worked."

Wright's project suffered not from low water, but from record high water levels. Just as it appeared Saltair's latest incarnation would begin to turn a profit, the fickle lake struck again. The floods of 1983 and 1984 put the pavilion's dance floor five feet

under water and all but destroyed the water slide and bumper boats.

Undaunted, the developer works daily to open the facility again next spring. He would like to construct a dike which would follow the receding water, giving visitors access to 2 or 3-foot deep saltwater. So far, he hasn't received permission for that scheme.

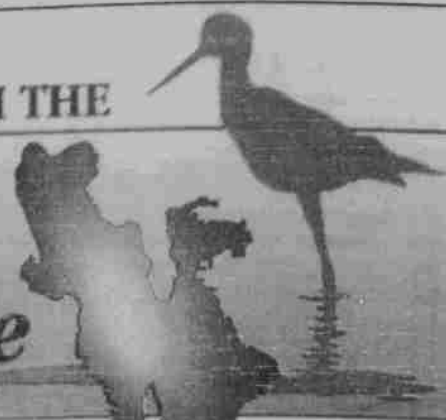
He also can't get permits to pump gasoline for boaters or to operate the three tour boats he has purchased.

"It's tough to fight city hall," sighs the developer. "We're trying to satisfy everyone's concerns."

Will Wright's rendition live up to its potential? Chances are, only the fickle lake can answer that question, which has plagued entrepreneurs for almost 150 years.

A YEAR WITH THE

Great Salt Lake



CHAPTER 3: THE GEOLOGY

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Despite Poor Facilities, Great Salt Lake a Must See for Tourists

By Tom Wharton
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Antelope Island is closed. A bombing range covers the west side of the Great Salt Lake. Bird refuges, industrial complexes and private land cut off access to beaches on the north and east.

Unless you have a boat, it's difficult to explore the Great Salt Lake. Most recreation use is concentrated on a narrow stretch of south shore beach.

Flanked by the Kennecott Copper refinery and its imposing smokestack, an Interstate Highway and the soggy shell of the new Saltair Resort, the Great Salt Lake is not the sort of place some 500,000 tourists write home about each year.

Rotting algae, brine shrimp and flies often give the beach an awful smell. The only visitors center is a trailer manned by volunteers. There are primitive dressing rooms, outdoor showers and stark flush toilets.

To swim, visitors must walk 10 minutes to the edge of the water and wade another five minutes before it's waist deep. There is no place to rent a boat or bicycle.

"It's kind of a homely place," says Salt Lake City sailor Bryant Pratt. "That's putting things kindly. The backdrop of the mills is ugly. And the marina itself could stand a lot of beautification. I enjoy sailing, but I always look out toward the lake."

Still, people come to see North America's Dead Sea. They taste the salty water and float like a cork in the buoyant, lifeless brine.

Some use their hands to scoop up tiny brine shrimp, the only living creatures in the lake.

Others fly kites on the expansive beach, race sailboards across the salty waters or photograph the spectacular sunsets — flaming orange, crimson and mauve splashed across blue backgrounds.

Tourists want to know what happened to the legendary Saltair Resort. They seek information on

early explorers like Jim Bridger, John C. Fremont and Howard Stansbury. They crave knowledge about the lake's birds, geology and plant life.

Like Mark Twain, Horace Greeley and Captain Richard Burton, who all traveled to the lake in the 1800s, visitors want to see the lake and come away with their own impressions, feelings and experiences.

But most local residents advise people not to bother.

Fae Beck, director of visitor services for the Salt Lake County Convention and Visitors Bureau, tells a story of a frustrated tourist who walked into her downtown office and said:

"I want to see the Great Salt Lake and don't tell me I don't want to see it."

Utahns and tourists from around the world often enjoy their experience.

Linda Heath of Salt Lake City takes her family to the beach four or five times a year.

"There's freedom for the kids to run and play," she says. "There is sand and space. No matter how many people are out here, you never feel crowded."

Florida resident Richard Fountain said that, where he comes from, a beach like this would be jammed. He looks out to the empty and quiet lake and wonders where the power boaters have gone.

The only boat ramp on the lake is located at the nearby marina. But, put off by the lack of fishing and worried about the effect of salt on their boats, most local power boaters don't bother to use it.

Saltair developer Wally Wright, who owns one of only four power boats moored in the marina, says exploring the Great Salt Lake is as much fun as visiting Lake Powell without the crowds. He likes to camp on the white sandy beach at Stansbury Island, which is difficult to reach

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Tribune File Photo

Saltair Resort and its famed Giant Racer roller coaster drew visitors from all over the world to dance, swim and enjoy the rides.

Questions About Great Salt Lake Are as Numerous as the Lake's Brine Shrimp

GREAT SALT LAKE STATE PARK — The two Florida tourists looked confused as they tried to visit the Great Salt Lake.

"What's that's thing?" inquired one, pointing toward the ghostlike Moorish-styled Saltair building.

"How salty is the lake?" asked the other.

"What's the smell?"

Plenty of questions. Few answers. If tourists search hard enough, they might discover a small trailer staffed by volunteers from the Salt Lake County Convention and Visitors Bureau. It contains basic history and ecological information on the lake.

State statistics show that just over one-tenth of the 412,782 people who visit the nearby state park find the trailer.

The visitors bureau would like a modern visitor center and rest stop built at the edge of the lake.

But legislators elected to fund a new Department of Transportation center in Vernal instead. It could be 1996 before a Great Salt Lake center is constructed.

Meanwhile, tourists visiting the state park won't find interpretive signs explaining the ecology of one of the most unique bodies of water in North America. They won't discover a nature trail where they can walk along the beach and learn why the salt-tolerant plants, insects and brine shrimp are so important to so many different birds and animals.

Nothing helps identify the birds, the distant islands, marshes or Great Basin geology that make this place special.

Tourists can get a soft drink or yogurt cone at a hot-dog stand. They can



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pick up a trinket in old railroad cars turned souvenir shops. They might even purchase a bag of saltwater taffy or a post card.

But they won't find a boat to take them on a tour of the lake, or a nice restaurant where they can enjoy the smell of saltwater and a fantastic sunset.

Recreation facilities at the Great Salt Lake — the second most important tourist attraction in the Salt Lake Val-

ley and 13th most popular in Utah — should be an embarrassment to both the Legislature and the Division of Parks and Recreation.

The parks people will blame the lack of facilities on the rising waters of the lake. They'll claim — correctly — that the Legislature and the governor hasn't given enough money or manpower to meet demands at the Great Salt Lake or elsewhere. They'll say the public will just have to accept the fickle lake as it is because most folks don't want higher taxes.

It is easier and more glamorous to put more emphasis on search and rescue and law enforcement efforts than on interpretive programs. That's a problem at most state parks. And it doesn't seem as if the parks division goes out of its way to help private enterprise survive on the lake.

One can only guess how much money this short-sighted thinking — especially on the part of the Legislature — is costing in lost tourist dollars.

How many people would visit Antelope Island if it was open?

How many visitors look at the Great Salt Lake as an example of what the Utah tourism industry is all about and flee the state in disgust?

What is lacking is the needed vision to turn the Great Salt Lake into one of America's great attractions?

Right now, for most residents, the lake and its limited facilities serve as an indictment to Utah's lack of imagination.

Next Week in Recreation:
The Book Cliffs